

A Hard Heart

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The Torah uses the word KaVeD, we normally translate this as hard, to harden. Literally it means heavy, stubborn, inflexible in different ways. But also, dignity and, respect. Things we may either be born with or develop or come to be appointed to. So the root word KVD can be used to say He (God) hardened his (Pharaoh's) heart. But it can say that Pharaoh himself hardened his own heart HiKViD. Or that his heart was heavy KaVed. Hardened, weighed down perhaps by society or circumstances.

There are so many ways in which we are influenced to make decisions. And God is another way of saying that somethings are in our nature, some in our genes and others the result of conditioning.

Pharaoh had a good reason for not giving in to Moses and Aaron. He was after all the Master of his Universe, the head of the most civilized nation of his time. When King Solomon dies, his son Rehoboam was asked to reduce the taxes. His wise men told him to. But his young friends warned him not to be weak. It would undermine his authority. Similarly Pharaoh may have felt that conceding would show him to be weak. He might lose his throne.

It's like the Chinese leaders who refused to make any concession to the protesters in Tiananmen Square. Or like Putin who thinks that aggression is the way to exercise power. Do they have no choice? Were they compelled? Or just that they themselves refused to see any other point of view?

The Talmud agrees that someone who has to overcome temptation to do good is regarded much more highly than someone who was good by nature.